Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts

Volume 6
Issue 2 *January 1966*

Article 2

1-1-1966

Reading is Also Involvement

Malcolm Robertson

READING IS ALSO INVOLVEMENT

Malcolm Robertson

Twenty years ago, mental health personnel talked and wrote much about man's aggressive impulse and the subtle and not so subtle ramifications of this impulse in various areas of human existence. They deplored man's aggression toward man. However, during the last decade the concern has shifted from man's aggression toward man to man's indifference toward man. Many times we can do something about people hurting one another, but what can you do when people simply don't care what happens to their fellow human beings. How often do we pick up the newspaper and read an account of how "law-abiding" citizens, who wouldn't think of hurting someone, turn their back on some individual whose life is in serious danger. They always have the same explanation. "Well, I just didn't want to get involved." It is as though they are saying, "I have my problems, I don't want yours; I don't want to venture out of my comfortable little world, because I'll get involved and somehow or other this getting involved may do things to my life that I won't like." Of course, the more shocking acts of indifference are highly visible in our society. Much less visible are the milder, more subtle symptoms of non-involvement, non-caring, which strike far more people than we realize, old and young, men and women, the well-educated and the little-educated.

At this point the reader may be murmuring to himself, "Yes . . . Yes, this indifference does seem to be a problem today in our society . . . but what does this have to do with reading?" Well, I believe that this attitude of non-involvement, this non-caring orientation toward the world, is likely to have its effect on something as basic as reading. Reading is one important form of encounter with life, one meaningful way of interacting with the world. Yet, many college educated adults as well as adults in the process of being college educated show an unbelievable indifference toward what they read—a lack of caring about what they read, how much, or even why they read what they do read. They read, but they can't or won't get involved in the experience. Their actions seem to say, "I'll read it as long as it doesn't affect me in any significant way, as long as I am not required to invest something of myself, as long as it isn't really going to count in any important way."

This attitude of caring or involvement determines not only whether one reads, but also what one reads, how much one reads, and more importantly why one reads. People who feel compelled to read either by external pressures of a job, school, or by a guilty feeling that they ought to read this or that, do more "serious" reading, often seem to go through the motions of reading. Their "head" is not in it, much less their "heart." There is no real encounter between their thoughts and those of the author, and the experience is an empty one. How many times have we heard phrases like, "Yes, I read that, I've been reading a little bit on the subject, well, it's different, I'll say that, he does seem to have some good points, he really does . . . I don't exactly remember what they are because I read it hurriedly, or, I'm not much good at remembering details, only the general idea." But very often they don't have even a general idea, or as the British would say, not even the "foggiest"—perhaps some amorphous impression, some faint echo of the author's emotional tone. As Virginia Voeks puts it so well in her book *On Being An Educated Person,* they would have to remember at least some of the pertinent details, because the details give the ideas meaning.

I think it is significant that generally people who live in the country read their local news more intently than those in small towns, and people in small towns read their newspaper more intently than those in large cities. It is also apparent that people living in the country or small towns, however much they value self-reliance and self-sufficiency, are more involved with one another, care more about what is happening to those around them, than people in large urban areas.

The reluctance to become involved in reading may be expressed in several ways. For example, some insist that others read for them: "Oh, you read it and then tell me about it"—a form of vicarious living through other peoples' reading experiences. Or one's reading interests gradually narrow and contract. Others surround themselves with reading material, most of which has been carefully selected to conform to what they already know or believe, which of course makes reading a very comfortable experience. It is comfortable because the familiarity of the material requires little effort or concentration on their part, while at the same time they have the "warm" feeling of being right without having to examine the correctness of what they believe. It may also take the form of reading the "right" books, the "right" periodicals, or maybe what the "right" people read, whoever they are. But since they are reading the right things for the wrong reasons, they read superficially, inattentively. Again, Virginia Voeks

gives a nice example in her book. If you ask the person about an editorial they have just finished reading, they may reply, "Well, someone said some senator did something wrong." Who said it, what senator, what did he do that was wrong, why was it wrong, and how does the writer know it was wrong? Now, how involved can you be, how much can you really care, if your encounter with reading can be summed up as "someone said some senator did something wrong."

This indifference, this reluctance to become involved may take a subtle, even whimsical form. I am reminded of a conversation I had one day with a Peace Corps trainee. He was trying to decide how he could transport all his pocketbooks overseas. I commented that this should not be too much of a problem, since pocketbooks are small and light. He replied, "But what if you have 250 pocketbooks to air freight overseas." Somewhat taken back but still trying, I asked, "Well, how many of these have you read? I mean, couldn't you just take the ones you haven't read?" At this juncture, I can't recall his exact answer, but it went something like this. "But I haven't read most of them. When I do have time for reading, I go downtown and spend a few hours browsing around bookstores, and I usually end up buying half a dozen or so new pocketbooks. You see . . . by the time I get through browsing and buying, and buying and browsing, and then building additional book shelves, I really don't have time to read."

This sounds a bit like the old "busy work" dodge. One's time is spent in making endless preparations to do something that is important, that really counts, but never gets done. If you spin your mental wheels long enough, you can make a pretty nice rut for yourself. A more familiar tactic is procrastination. For instance, while visiting someone you may notice one or two interesting books displayed on the table. When you comment on the book or books, your friend replies, "Oh yes, I have been meaning to get to them for some time now," and then their voice trails off, "I usually try to catch up on my reading on the weekend." Well, we know what weekends are like for most of us. We try to accomplish in two days what by even the most generous estimate could not be done in less than four days. By the time Sunday night comes around, and we know how fast it comes around, we are so emotionally exhausted that when we slump into that easy chair or couch, we wonder just how we are ever going to get up.

While it is always easier to describe a problem than to offer a solution, I think my solution would have to consider the following points. First, we have to accept the fact that involvement, whether it

be with a book, a person, a cause, can be risky. If we open ourselves fully to what we read, try to put ourselves in the shoes of the author, to understand what he is really trying to tell us, we may be changed by the experience. We are unsure of what we may lose in the process or what we may gain. Change nearly always mobilizes some anxiety, because it touches some part of our sense of security. Consequently, to become involved means to be willing to tolerate some additional tension and anxiety in our lives. The important point is not the fact of anxiety or tension, but the attitude that we decide to take toward it. Depending upon our attitude, it can give our lives an added sense of zest, or verve, or on the other hand, a feeling of discouragement, of pessimism.

A second point has to do with the example we set for our children. Children have to learn how to become involved, how to care deeply about what happens around them, and in the formative years they take their cues from their parents and teachers. Some of the important cues come from observing the significance that reading has in our lives. Other important cues come from the manner in which we react to their reading experiences. For example, children sometimes become quite absorbed in a story they read, often because it introduces them to experiences that are larger than their own life. Rather than toning down their excitement and enthusiasm by a remark such as, "Now, you have to remember, it's *only* a story," we can encourage this involvement by sharing with them their enthusiasm and excited curiosity.

A final point is one that an Existentialist might make: "Whatever you do, do it with passion, with intensity, or don't do it." It really matters little how often you read or how much, but how you read when you do read. For instance, a person may go through a museum or art gallery ten times in a perfunctory manner, putting in time so to speak. Or he may go through once with a sense of purpose, with a genuine openness to whatever the experience may evoke in him. In other words, the important question is what happened to him while he was there. To return to our concern with reading, what did the person do while he was there with the author. If he is going to be there with the author, then let him be there with passion, with intensity, or don't be there.

References

Voeks, Virginia. *On Becoming An Educated Person.* Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders Co., 1964..

Malcolm H. Robertson is an Associate Professor of Psychology at Western Michigan University. He has written extensively in his field and has developed an interest in the psychology of reading.